



State of California—Health and Human Services Agency
Department of Health Services



ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER
Governor

TO: Local Health Officers,
Local Disease Control Officers, and
Directors of Environmental Health

FROM: Environmental Management Branch and
Disease Investigations and Surveillance Branch

SUBJECT: Annual Mussel Quarantine

The Quarantine Order

The Department's annual mussel quarantine is being established from April 23 through October 31 to protect the public from consuming sport-harvested mussels with elevated levels of the paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) toxin. The annual quarantine was scheduled to begin on May 1. However, extensive sampling of mussels has confirmed that shellfish-borne toxins are currently at unsafe levels. A copy of the 2004 mussel quarantine order, in both English and Spanish, issued by Sandra Shewry, Director of the California Department of Health Services (DHS) for the prevention of paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP) is enclosed.

Press Releases

DHS will issue a press release announcing the annual mussel quarantine to all major news services in California. A copy of the draft DHS press release is enclosed. Securing media coverage in all counties is very important since PSP outbreaks in the past have involved residents of inland counties as well as those along the coast. Your assistance is requested to ensure that this announcement receives coverage in your area. A background information summary is provided with this memo for your use in preparing local press releases and answering inquiries.

Placards

Quarantine placards (or the quarantine notice itself) should be placed in conspicuous locations near popular mussel and clam beds within your jurisdiction to warn the public of the paralytic shellfish poisoning hazard. They also should be provided for display at stores, bait shops, dive shops, public parks and access points, and similar locations along the coast.

Reporting of Shellfish Poisoning Illness

PSP and poisoning due to any other marine biotoxins (such as domoic acid) are reportable as food poisoning (Title 17, California Code of Regulations, Sections 2500 & 2574). Even suspected cases of shellfish poisoning in humans should be reported immediately by telephone to local health departments and by them, day or night, to the Division of Communicable Disease Control [weekdays, (510) 540-2566; nights and weekends (510) 540-2308].

Outreach to Groups at High Risk of PSP

Special efforts to inform the high-risk Philippine and Southeast Asian communities of shellfish poisoning hazards should be continued. Efforts should be made through whatever channels are available, such as local health department liaison workers and the leaders of local community organizations. Many Southeast Asian and Philippine immigrants are not familiar with PSP, as it may rarely occur in that part of the world. PSP quarantine warning signs in Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Ilocano, and Tagalog are available from the Department of Health Services, Environmental Management Branch (EMB) office in Richmond, telephone (510) 412-4635.

Shellfish Toxins Monitoring Program

All coastal county health departments again are requested to participate in the shellfish biotoxin monitoring program. In the last major PSP outbreak in 1980, the sudden appearance of illnesses in July came without warning because few coastal shellfish samples had been submitted for analysis. Since 1980, certified commercial shellfish harvesters have been required to submit weekly samples to DHS for analysis during all harvesting periods.

If illness and deaths from PSP are to be prevented, it is essential to have periodic sampling data from other locations, especially along the open coast, where mussels may commonly be harvested despite quarantine warnings. Coastal mussel samples also are essential because they provide early warning information needed to keep clam and cockle beds open during the quarantine period. If an adequate coastal monitoring program is not maintained, it may be necessary to quarantine all species of sport harvested bivalve mollusks, not just mussels, during the May through October period or even longer.

Coastal county health authorities also are invited to participate in a unique volunteer based phytoplankton monitoring program now being conducted by EMB. Early detection of toxin-producing phytoplankton can alert DHS to potentially dangerous toxic blooms before shellfish resources are impacted.

How to Sample and Submit Shellfish Specimens

Each coastal county health department is requested to submit shellfish samples (mussels from the outer coast are preferred) from at least two representative sites, twice per month from May through October, and once per month during the remaining months, as weather and tidal conditions permit. Please note that at least 200 grams of shellfish meat are requested. Shipping containers and detailed instructions can be obtained by contacting EMB at (510) 412-4635. You will be notified promptly of laboratory test results if any sample equals or exceeds the federally established "alert" level of 80 micrograms of PSP toxins per 100 grams of shellfish meat. In addition, all coastal county health departments and other sampling program participants receive a monthly and an annual summary of all shellfish testing results for the entire coast of California.

Shellfish Information Line

The Department's Shellfish Information Line, with recorded updates on shellfish biotoxins and quarantines, has a toll-free telephone number at 1-800-553-4133.

If you have questions about any of these matters, please feel free to call Gregg W. Langlois, coordinator of the EMB Biotoxin Monitoring Program, at (510) 412-4635, or S. Benson Werner, M.D., Chief, Disease Investigations Section of the Disease Investigations and Surveillance Branch, telephone (510) 540-2566.

Enclosure